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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION WASHINGTON DC
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0654

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SENSITIVE

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DEPT FOR DRL AND EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL AM
SUBJECT: GOAM-OPPOSITION CLASHES IN CENTRAL YEREVAN ESCALATE

REF: YEREVAN 668

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The confrontations between police and opposition protesters on Yerevan's Northern Avenue that began the morning of August 26 (reftel) escalated in the afternoon and throughout the following day. Police forcibly removed and detained some protesters who had been camped there for weeks collecting signatures on petitions calling for new elections and for the International Criminal Court indictment of former President Kocharian. This action in turn spawned an increased activist presence on the pedestrian mall that at one point even included former First Lady Ludmila Ter-Petrossian. These confrontations have breathed new life into the opposition protests that had waned during the dog days of summer, and have come at a time when the GOAM wants to put on its best face in the run-up to an expected September 6 visit by Turkey's President Gul. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) According to media reports, riot police detained six opposition members on the afternoon of August 26, after discovering that pro-Ter-Petrossian posters they had torn down and removed earlier in the day had reemerged as graffiti painted on the sidewalk. The detentions occurred after police had forcibly removed the tables protesters were using to garner signatures for their petition campaigns. Despite strikers' claims that they had not painted the graffiti, the police demanded it be cleaned before they would release the detainees. According to ARAVOT newspaper, one of the six was a minor whom police released immediately, while the others were taken to Police headquarters and released later in the evening.

¶3. (SBU) Opposition spokesperson Levon Zurabian told emboffs that the increased instances of police violence towards the strikers "shows that the authorities are intimidated by them and shows their weakness" in advance of the planned but unauthorized September 5 rally. Zurabian said that the Police had no legal grounds for confiscating the posters or for the detentions.

¶4. (U) A1 Plus reports that along with the threat to disperse protesters and their belongings by force, Police had issued the strikers a deadline of 9:00 am, August 27, to remove their blankets and mats from Northern Avenue. After an all-night vigil attended by many protesters, including former First Lady Ludmila Ter-Petrossian, the opposition activists grudgingly complied, noting publicly that they saw police action as a violation of their constitutional rights and claiming that the police wanted to create conditions under which they would be unable to continue their strike.

¶5. (U) In a previous Northern Avenue incident, a 17-year-old opposition supporter reportedly was stabbed and wounded in the arm by a government loyalist late Monday. David Kiramijian described his attacker as an elderly man who shouted abuse at the protesters. "I just told him that there are women and children here and he should stop swearing," Kiramijian told RFE/RL. "He then came up to me, swearing, and stabbed me." Kiramijian was immediately taken to

the hospital where he received stitches for his wound. The Armenian police said in a statement the next day that his presumed attacker, identified as Volodya Manukian, had been detained for questioning and then had been set free pending further investigation.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: If anything, police actions over recent days have begun to breathe new life into the Northern Avenue protest campaign, which had been flagging under the hot summer sun and amidst the fuel and supply worries associated with the war in Georgia. We see this as the GOAM's attempt to clean up pesky protesters and put on its best face in advance of the September 6 Turkey-Armenia World Cup-qualifying football match, to which President Sargsian has invited his Turkish counterpart.

PENNINGTON